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ABSTRACT

Mindful of the need for quality professional development and its characteristics, large numbers of educators are self-selecting to participate in workplace/community learning (WCL) experiences. Viewed as an alternative to less desirable forms of traditional professional development, WCL displays characteristics of high-quality professional development and motivates increased interdependent learning among the parties involved. WCL experiences must include the following components: (1) an orientation to the WCL experience; (2) the experiential component; (3) the development of an action plan; and (4) engagement in connecting activities following the WCL experience. The following strategies help create conducive learning environments in WCL programs: (1) effective brokering of WCL opportunities; (2) communicating the experience's relevance in enhancing instructional practice; (3) recognizing time constraints; and (4) providing incentives for participation. Tasks associated with completing a project during a WCL experience should provide in-depth understanding of the following things: the business or organization; a workplace technology application; the use of academic skills in emerging careers; and other insights important to both educators and hosts. WCL providers have been proven to offer transformative and contextualized learning experiences providing insight into how the academic content and theories they teach are applied in settings beyond school. A WCL action planning checklist is included. (Contains 12 references.) (MN)

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LINKING EDUCATORS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TO WORKPLACE/COMMUNITY LEARNING EXPERIENCES

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TeachNET

A Professional Development Network for Contextual Teaching and Learning

Educational Brief

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As schools face increasing demands for accountability in education, many states and districts across the nation have imposed instructional improvement initiatives (e.g., standards-based curriculum frameworks and performance-oriented assessments) in an attempt to ensure effective delivery of subject matter and student learning. In recent years, professional development has been presented as the magical elixir that will prepare educators to meet instructional mandates and maximize student learning. Professional development seeks to maximize student learning by increasing the knowledge, skill, and problem-solving capacity of educators and other stakeholders (The Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, 1996).

Recently, a variety of perspectives on what constitutes quality professional development have been articulated. These perspectives stem from the emphasis various authors place on the different aspects of an educator's professional growth and development (preservice and/or in-service) and from the ultimate goal (educational reform and/or improved student learning) of the engagement. According to educators and current literature, quality professional development is:

- variable and flexible in duration, intensity, and frequency,
- a continuous effort supported by administration and resources, and
- a collaborative effort in defining content, context, and process.

Due to a lack of these qualities, many traditional professional development strategies are viewed as less desirable and ineffective. It is evident that educators are becoming increasingly vocal about their discontent with current efforts to sustain their professional growth and development. No longer are they satisfied with being herded into a room, presented with information in a didactic manner, and turned out in hopes that something will happen. With the characteristics of quality professional development in mind, large numbers of educators are self-selecting to participate in workplace/community learning (WCL) experiences. Viewed by educators as an alternative to the less desirable forms of traditional professional development, WCL displays characteristics of high-quality professional development and motivates increased interdependent learning among the parties involved.

Workplace/Community Learning

Given current emphases on state standards, experienced educators may be inclined to seek "real world" affirmation that their curriculum and teaching strategies are relevant and useful to today's students. Recent studies suggest that in addition to classroom learning, work-based learning is vital to students' success both in career pursuits and in post-secondary education (Bailey and Merritt , 1997, Stern, et. al, 1995). However, many educators do not know what educating youth for the emerging global workplace entails.

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These educators are at a disadvantage when they try to integrate subject matter into a context that is meaningful beyond school. Workplace/community learning (WCL) experiences give educators relevant and current information, as well as real-world examples that can enrich curricular content in a wide variety of courses—including courses in both academic and technical areas such as history, English, mathematics, and drafting.

Since the implementation of the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994, WCL experiences for educators have flourished across the nation. Prior to 1994, these experiences were primarily established by local employers and nonprofit organizations. Today, the majority of educator WCL experiences are facilitated by school districts, community colleges, educational service regions, and local education-business partnerships. An educator WCL experience is traditionally defined as a work-site experience where participants complete a series of activities, and, after a period of reflection, produce a demonstrable product (such as action/ lesson plans or classroom activities) that can be used to enhance their instructional practice.

Workplace/community learning experiences have been designed for varying groups of K–16 and pre-service educators. Academic and career/technical educators, counselors, administrators, and educators working with special populations are all encouraged to participate. Although programs vary considerably, all are designed to increase participation in and awareness of the workplace and provide the knowledge and experience that will help educators prepare students to enter (and learn from) work-related experiences.

For education professionals, WCL experiences and the resulting connecting activities provide a crucial link between theory and practice, which enables educators, administrators, and counselors to reflect critically and philosophically on their educational practice (Inkster, 1992). These experiences are vital in creating an educational environment that gives teams of educators practical firsthand experience in problem solving, planning and management, facilitating collegial and experiential learning, and developing authentic forms of assessment.

WCL experiences need to include four essential components:

- an orientation to the WCL experience,
- the experiential component,
- the development of an action plan, and
- engagement in connecting activities following the WCL experience.

(Sargent & Ettinger, 1998; Keystone Area Educational Agency, 1996; NWREL, 1997).

Defining the Experience

Recognizing that educators must meet a variety of teaching, administrative, and community expectations, the proper conditions, motivation, and incentives must be in place to elicit participation in WCL experiences. Once educators have agreed to participate, an orientation to the WCL experience is essential for its successful implementation.

The creation of a conducive adult learning environment is accomplished through:

- effective brokering of WCL opportunities,
- communicating the experience's relevancy in enhancing instructional practice,
- recognizing time constraints, and
- providing incentives for participation.

The WCL orientation provides the foundation and context for the participating educators and for the workplace/community host. Orientation sets the stage for both the employer's and educator's experience, while providing ample opportunities for both to identify goals and expectations. The WCL experience must be seen as a legitimate professional learning experience by all parties involved rather than as a collection of experiences or duties requiring only temporary service. The orientation should emphasize the connections to professional development and specific potential gains in instructional practice.

Whatever the structure of the WCL experience may be, it is essential to establish clearly defined expectations and a meaningful relationship with the host at the community/workplace site. Valuable learning experiences can be lost if interactions between participants and supervisors are guided only by the dynamics of a worker-supervisor relation. A successful experience is guided by clarified expectations of the relationship between participants and supervisors. Essentially, hosts must be aware that educators are there to work and contribute professionally to the organization. At the same time, men-

tors must understand that educators are also there to gain new knowledge and skills, and to increase their understanding of workplace dynamics. An effective host works with an educator in identifying goals, ideas, and problem scenarios that the educator can transfer to teaching situations; coaches the educator in learning new skills and knowledge; and helps the educator understand the multiple aspects of the workplace. Experiences that allow educators to use their current skills and knowledge to complete worthwhile projects or contribute to the solving of problems (as a typical employee would do) make important contributions to an educator's professional growth and development. Concurrently, educators should be able to participate in activities that require the learning and application of new skills and knowledge to enhance their instructional practice.

As educators enter the WCL process, they must be prepared to look at the experience through multiple lenses. The most obvious lens focuses on the presence and application of specific academic and technical content. Concurrently, educators should also focus on:

- identifying opportunities to learn about the various aspects of the work conducted,
- broadening their perspectives about how modern workplaces function,
- identifying technology applications and career opportunities to use in instruction and career guidance activities,
- documenting skills that both beginning and advanced workers need to be successful, and
- compiling career and labor market information that will help students when they are ready to enter the workforce.

The orientation session's primary goal should be to communicate the relevancy of WCL experience in enhancing instructional practices and, ultimately, student outcomes.

Continuum of Experiences

During the summer, time is a precious commodity for educators. In order to encourage educators' participation in WCL experiences, organizers must offer a variety of choices for participation. In addition, organizations should offer WCL experiences that vary in duration, clearly communicating that even brief experiences are valuable to an educators' professional growth and development.

Once educators engage in the experience, they quickly find that the nature of WCL varies widely based on the predetermined outcomes or a final assignment, interactions with host employers, and workplace culture. The experiential component of the WCL experience can range from an intensive internship (during which an educator is expected to work 40 hours per week on the job for a full eight weeks) to a less formal job-shadowing experience (which might last a day or two). The less formal experiences are recommended for educators interested in obtaining a general overview of workplace issues, using their new knowledge to better understand the "new economy."

To improve teaching, learning, and curriculum, an educator should participate in a more formal experience that can offer longer and more in-depth experience in the field. During this experience the educator may pursue specific learning objectives, complete a planned series of activities, and/or complete a project. Although many WCL experiences have several organizational components in common, most need to be tailored to the unique characteristics of the surrounding community. Some experiences are designed for an individual to obtain a single in-depth workplace/community experience, while other experiences expose educators to a wide variety of activities. Generally, participants have varying levels of involvement during an extended WCL experience. Participation levels may be related to the amount of knowledge and skill the individual brings to the organization and the experience assignment.

Tasks associated with completing a project during the WCL expereience should provide a deep understanding of:

- the business or organization,
- a workplace technology application,
- the use of academic skills in emerging careers, or
- other insights important to both the educator and the host.

In addition, professional growth can be enhanced by allowing educators to participate in interdisciplinary teams that are part of the regular organizational structure. Learning how

other professionals collaborate in workplace and community organizations can help educators identify the many benefits associated with interdisciplinary collaboration. Opportunities to work in teams can show educators different points of view about problems, and about using complimentary expertise to find the best solutions. Since much of the work in the schools is highly compartmentalized, these opportunities can help educators identify possibilities for future peer collaboration.

Through survey and focus group data, educators returning from WCL experiences have indicated that seeing theories and principles in context enables them to make teaching richer and learning more relevant for students. With few exceptions, they believed their teaching is qualitatively and quantitatively better because of their participation in WCL.

Integrating the Experience

While educators who engaged in WCL are highly cognizant of the potential and rationale for connecting their curricular content to an external context, they may still find it difficult to do so. Developing an action plan is an essential step for participants to successfully integrate the WCL experience into the educational setting. An action plan presents a specific blueprint for designing, modifying, and informing educational practice that integrates school-based and work-based learning, while documenting how the experience will be translated into educational practice. Given the educator's participation in the WCL experience, the communication and documentation presented through the action plan should capture the information listed in the WCL action planning checklist.

WCL Action Planning Checklist

- ❑ Demonstrate a connection between work-based and school-based learning.
- ❑ Describe strategies for integrating the experience into academic and career/ technical learning opportunities.
- ❑ Demonstrate the impact of the experience on personal professional growth and development.
- ❑ Describe the educational practice(s) to be addressed and the changes to be made as a result of implementation.
- ❑ Describe the target audience and an analysis of:
  a. their probable learning styles,
  b. the probable forms of learner resistance, and
  c. potential structural and functional organizational conflicts that could affect the success of the action plan.
- ❑ Explain the exercises, presentations, and activities to be conducted after participating in the WCL experience. The explanations should include samples of any materials, handouts, overheads, or other documentation that can be used to support the activities.
- ❑ Describe the authentic performance assessment tasks and their alignment with local, state, and national educational standards.
- ❑ List references pertinent to the topic of the action plan. This list should include contacts made during the experience, organizational documents, and literary publications that may be useful.

Research has shown that the WCL experience alone is not sufficient for developing action plans. Educators needed help:

- translating their experience into learning activities,
- broadening their instructional planning to include teaching and learning of generic work skills and work-related attitudes in addition to basic subject matter,
- aligning action plans with and among the local, state, and national initiated standards,
- considering ways of infusing relevant aspects of work practices into the classroom, and
- planning for working collaboratively with other educators (Sargent, 1999; Stasz, 1997; McCormick, 1993).

I was just interested in how businesses relate to science. You know, what they actually do. What kind of training they wanted the students to have today. I'm supposed to be preparing students for employment; what does that entail?

High School Biology Teacher

I picked up a few technical skills and a lot of insight into how a technician really approaches a job, and what's important for me to teach and what's maybe not so important for me to teach.

High School Electronics Teacher

I became more convinced that what I do in my regular English classes should be more directly connected to skills for the workplace.

High School English Teacher

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Supporting professional development opportunities which assist with these topics should be provided by partners involved in this educational endeavor.

Seminars and workshops, facilitated by institutions of higher education and intermediary organizations, are the common formats used to provide continuous connecting professional development activities following—and occasionally during—the experiential component. This structured period of time set aside for debriefing is another component of successful WCL experiences. During this time, discussions of learning theories, new methods of instruction, and strategies for curriculum integration may occur. Activities may promote and increase awareness of contextual teaching and learning themes such as:

- emphasizing problem-solving,
- recognizing the need for teaching and learning to occur in a variety of contexts such as home, community, and work sites,
- teaching students to monitor and direct their own learning so they become self-regulated learners,
- anchoring teaching in students' diverse life-contexts,
- encouraging students to learn from each other and together, and
- employing authentic assessment.

Seminar participants may spend time reading and discussing professional articles and research relevant to educational reform and the role of business-education partnerships. In contrast to the collaborative group activities, individual documentation of the experience occurs through journal entries, reflective written narratives, and the development of curricular and instructional materials that integrate knowledge, skills, and insights obtained from the WCL experience. In the end though, participants need to define for themselves, and as an organization, what constitutes a quality action plan and teaching and learning reflective of WCL.

Once experiences have been synthesized and integrated into the educational setting, time should be spent reflecting on the instructional practices and student outcomes associated with these modifications.

I am emphasizing more individual problem solving, keeping records, referring back, using other people as resources in your team instead of doing all the work yourself. Sharing, collaborating, and communicating. I would say that's basically just from the internships.

High School Business Teacher

Reflection on the Experience

In reflecting upon WCL experiences, educators have stated that this form of professional development has provided them with insight into how the academic content and theories they teach are applied in settings beyond school (Sargent, 1999). In her case study of the Classrooms that Work model, Stasz (1997) described the benefit of linking educators with workplaces and workers. Stasz asserted that this model and associated experiences provide sources of knowledge about real-world contexts that allow educators to identify where generic and subject-specific knowledge was required and used. In turn, the content of their instruction is more authentic, even if they continue to use traditional teaching methods. In accordance with research findings (Lynch & Harnish, 1998; Borko & Putnam, 1998), participants reported that WCL experiences provided them with a way to deepen their understanding of theoretical principles applicable to everyday career/technical settings, and provided a way to connect their curricular content to settings beyond school.

Transformative learning seems to be commonplace among WCL experiences. Participants often report that challenges to knowledge and meaning lead them to modify their perceptions and to create a new set of behaviors and actions.

> It really opened my eyes to the possibilities, and it was a lot of fun to see the people that I worked with this summer become enthusiastic about helping me improve my teaching. They helped me find the resources to bring back to the classroom. To have that feedback and have them so helpful and willing to give me suggestions and be willing to come speak to the class was a real boost. For educators inclined to participate in WCL, these insights provide reassurance that their instruction will prove useful to students as they make the transition from school to college and/or work.
>
> High School Chemistry Teacher

I was able to hone some of the techniques and use some of the equipment that's not available here in the classroom. . . to use computers in a real-world application. . . to deal with computers to do statistical analysis, run spreadsheets on data, and do a lot of work on computers. As an educator, particularly in science, you talk about the whole scientific approach, scientific theory, how you design an experiment, variable testing and all that type of thing. In my WCL experience I got to set up and run two different labs from initial conception to basically final product. . . it reinforced for me that whole concept of the development of the experiment, how you do it correctly, and how it really works in the real world.

Middle School Mathematics Teacher

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This reinforces Cranton's (1994) theory of *self-directed and transformative instructional development* that stated:

> Adult learners have assumptions, beliefs, and values that determine the way they interpret the world and their experiences. These assumptions may be challenged by people, events, changes in context, crises, or new experiences. The individual may then be led to an examination of his or her assumptions. In critical self-reflection, the learner questions whether or not the assumptions are valid. If this process leads to a change in assumptions, it also leads to a new way of interpreting the world, and transformation has taken place. Actions and behaviors will be changed based on the changed perspective (p.28).

Testimonials and action plans developed as a result of the WCL experience generally reflect transformative experiences related to "real world" teaching and learning strategies. These strategies develop as a result of specific events that modify educators' understanding of how the workplace connects to the educational setting. Although many approaches to professional development have the potential to catalyze transformative experiences, participants more readily associate transformation with WCL over conventional professional development approaches. For instance, in a recent research study of WCL experiences (Sargent, 1999), educators prompted to elaborate on district-sponsored professional development opportunities could, for the most part, provide little or no detail about their most recent experience. With a similar prompt related to their most recent WCL, educators were able to provide extensive detail about the experience.

Conclusion

Evidence is mounting that in order to be effective, professional development must be grounded in practical applications with direct links to meeting the immediate needs of the participant. Educators suggest that professional development activities centering around workplace/community learning experiences create transformations in their instructional practice, and elicit improved outcomes for their students.

Educators are looking for contextualized experiences that have direct application to their individual educational settings and that will enhance student understanding and achievement. Models of workplace/community learning provide this much–needed alternative to the status quo.

Supporters of WCL experiences identify a number of outcomes which participants in this type of experience achieve:

Educators benefit from the:

- application of real-world experiences to classroom subject matter,
- enrichment of their knowledge and skills ,
- ability to validate and align curricular content,
- recognition that their expertise has value beyond the classroom,
- ability to link their experience to future student success, and
- academic credit and monetary compensation typically associated with these experiences.

Student learning is enhanced by the educator's ability to:

- connect school-based learning with real-world problems and examples,
- provide the current information, skills, and knowledge necessary to function in the workplace,
- integrate up-to-date information on trends in business organizations that utilize the academic knowledge and skills taught in the classroom,
- provide accurate and timely information on careers, and
- create appropriate work-based learning experiences for students.

Educational settings benefit from the:

- improved links to the community through its educators,
- curricular improvements,
- professional development experiences that improve educational reform efforts and enhance strategic plans, and
- increased access to technical workplace teaching technologies (e.g. donation or use of cutting-edge equipment, software, case studies).

Workplace/community organizations that support these experiences benefit by having:

- local schools and colleges focus directly on the skills and knowledge required by new employees,
- a community profile that demonstrates their commitment to strengthening education,
- insights about improving the lifelong learning capacity and educational programs of their businesses, and
- educator interns engaged in projects that contribute to the organization's success.

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For more information on the *Teach*NET project...
www.cew.wisc.edu/teachnet

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